

# The boarding school testimony of Charlotte Brontë

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## Abstract

**Purpose** – Charlotte Brontë integrated her own and her sisters' traumatic boarding school experiences into her novel, *Jane Eyre* (1847) as a way of expressing her anger through autobiographical fiction. The aim is to link contemporary research into boarding school trauma to the relevant events, thereby identifying what she wrote as a testimony contributing to the long history of the problematic nature of boarding schools.

**Design/methodology/approach** – Autobiographical fiction is discussed as a form of testimony, placing Jane Eyre in that category. Recent research into the traumatic experiences of those whose parents chose to send them to boarding school is presented, leading to an argument that educational historians need to analyse experience rather than limiting their work to structure and planning. The traumatic events the Brontë sisters experienced at the Clergy Daughters' School are outlined as the basis for what is included in *Jane Eyre* at the fictional Lowood School. Specific traumatic events in the novel are then identified and contemporary research into boarding school trauma applied.

**Findings** – The findings reveal Charlotte's remarkable insight into the psychological impact on children being sent away to board at a time when understandings about trauma and boarding school trauma did not exist. An outcome of the analysis is that it places the novel within the field of the history of education as a testimony of boarding school life.

**Originality/value** – This is the first application of boarding school trauma research to the novel.

**Keywords** Trauma, Boarding school, Testimony, Boarding school trauma, Charlotte Brontë

**Paper type** Research paper

## Introduction

When Charlotte Brontë's novel *Jane Eyre: An autobiography* was published in 1847, it was the first book to be written from "the oppressed child's point of view" (Harman, 2016, p. 55). A significant and traumatic part is Jane's school experience, which was based on Charlotte's boarding school experience at the Clergy Daughters' School, Cowan Bridge. Recent biographer, Claire Harman writes that "Charlotte Brontë's anger at the harm done to herself and her sisters [at the school] bursts forth in *Jane Eyre* . . ." (Harman, 2016, p. 54).

The aim of this article is to link contemporary boarding school trauma research with relevant events covered in *Jane Eyre*, identifying those events as a form of testimony by Charlotte Brontë of her time as a student at the Clergy Daughters' School at Cowan Bridge in 1824–1825. In doing so, this analysis contributes to historical reporting of the problematic nature of boarding schools (Schaverien, 2015, pp. 5–6, 22–30). The method involves identification of traumatic events in the early part of Jane Eyre's boarding school experience revealing significant consistency between findings from contemporary boarding school trauma literature, Brontë's autobiographical experience and her construction of Jane Eyre's experiences. This is the first application of this research to the novel. A significant outcome of the analysis is that it indicates the continuity of children's experiences and psychological responses to this type of schooling. The paper is offered as an introductory conversation on the use of autobiographical fiction on a specific form of schooling in the history of education.

Educational historians have been challenged to analyse experience rather than limiting their work to structure and planning (Finkelstein, 1992, p. 288). Fiction, as well as memoirs and historical documents, has been used in undertaking this shift (Miller, 1996). As will be discussed, *Jane Eyre* is partly a transmuted autobiography – a testimony of boarding school experience. My analysis is through the lens of educational history rather than literary



criticism although there is some intersection. *Jane Eyre* falls into the Gothic tradition of 18th-century literature (Grace, 2017; Khosravi, 2018). Female Gothic tradition “can be used to acknowledge histories of gendered violence and struggle” (Shajirat, 2019, p. 384) as well as the “disempowerment women experience at the hands of loved ones and the law alike in the long eighteenth century” (Shajirat, 2019, p. 390). Charlotte was sent in good faith to the Clergy Daughters’ School by her clergyman father because it was founded and directed by religious men her father trusted. The school regimes both in Charlotte Brontë’s and *Jane Eyre*’s boarding school experience reveal the violence which powerful men were able to inflict on the schoolgirls, particularly those with little money in charity schools, in the name of religion keeping them subjugated in a societal position. However, boarding schoolboys were also subjected to brutality in the 18th and 19th centuries, leaving a “legacy [that] ran like a thread through public schools of the twentieth century” (Schaverien, 2015, p. 20). When *Jane Eyre* was first published readers soon recognised that the boarding school aspects of the novel were based on true events.

### Fictional autobiography

Charlotte’s publisher suggested the subtitle knowing that “fictional autobiography”, with its “aesthetic of inwardness, veracity and intimacy” was an acceptable genre in the period (Davies, 2006Brontë, 1847, p. 531). Perhaps he intuitively recognised that “writing always carries traces of our lives” (Schwab, 2009, p. 278). An early review of the book was more explicit, stating that it was based on “knowledge of the profoundest springs of human emotions . . . rarely acquired without long years of bitter experience in the troubled sea of life” (Anon, no date, cited in Davies, 2006Brontë, 1847, p. 525). Contemporary research has shown that “traumatic experiences push for more overt articulation” into what authors write (Schwab, 2009, p. 278).

Nineteenth century readers realised that Lowood, the fictional boarding school where Jane is sent, was based on Charlotte’s experiences at Cowan Bridge. Charlotte regretted the recognition but asserted the facts she included were what she knew to be true at the time. After her death, her husband affirmed that what happened at Lowood was fully based on what she had experienced and this was confirmed by other pupils (Gérin, 1857, 1967, p. 11). Charlotte argued that as “fiction” it was not necessary “to state every particularity with the impartiality that might be required in court of justice”. Elizabeth Gaskell, Charlotte’s first biographer, stated she did not “seek out motives, and make allowances for human feelings” as she might have done if she had been writing a work of non-fiction (Gaskell, 1857, 1997, p. 51).

Charlotte’s claim positions it as a testimonial narrative which has an “urgency to communicate, a problem of repression, poverty, subalternity, imprisonment, struggle for survival” (Beverley, 1989, p. 14). Leigh Gilmore defines testimony as “those verbal acts in which a person bears witness to harm in a public forum” (Gilmore, 2017, p. 3). Testimony may be given through “autobiographical fiction” allowing for exploration of “the psychic effects and legacies of this history” through the voice of “a traumatic witness”, thereby providing insight into “the human subject of historical and intimate trauma” (Gilmore, 2017, pp. 153–154). Charlotte’s use of her experiences places it in the category of testimonial narrative and autobiographical fiction. Re-authoring of one’s life may be “enhanced by recruiting an ‘external’ audience who contribute by ‘witnessing’ and whose response to it may contribute to the ‘revisions and extensions of the new story’” (White and Epston, 1990, p. 17). Application of research into boarding school trauma to the “story” recruits me as a witness to Charlotte’s testimony with a capacity to extend it.

### Boarding school trauma research

Trauma is an “unbearable and intolerable” experience (Van der Kolk, 2104, p. 1). It is pushed out of the conscious mind in an effort to deal with it but the memory persists as an “imprint”

on “the mind, brain and body” (Van der Kolk, 2014, p. 21). Australian psychiatrist Patrick Morris made the first and only application of trauma theory to *Jane Eyre*. He begins with the “terrible child abuse” Jane experiences in her foster home (Morris, 2013, p. 158) followed by Lowood school as “an environment of systematic neglect, abuse and violence” (Morris, 2013, p. 162). What Morris does not draw upon is the growing body of psychological research into boarding school trauma that has emerged in recent years.

There has been extensive research in the last 30 years into boarding school trauma in private fee-paying schools in the UK. Nick Duffell’s 2000 book, based on 10 years of work as a psychotherapist with what he terms “boarding school survivors”, is a psycho-historical study of the problematic short- and long-term effects (Duffell, 2000). In 2002, psychotherapist Joy Schaverien provided a case study of the “catastrophic psychological consequences” on a man sent to board at 8 years of age (Schaverien, 2002, p. 25). Her 2015 book was “the first full-length, research-based, psychological analysis of the lasting effects of boarding school” based on 20 years of working with male and female ex-boarders and is the first analysis of the impact on women (Schaverien, 2015, p. 1). She found that while boarding schools may be considered to be a “privilege”, they are also a “form of captivity” where the child is “subject to the will of the other”, “powerless” and “unable to articulate” their suffering (Schaverien, 2015, p. 5).

Ysenda Maxtone Graham interviewed women who had attended a variety of 20th-century boarding schools concluding that by being separated from their families and facing “ordeals” together the girls learned the value of friendships for “warding off loneliness and depression” (Maxtone Graham, 2016, p. 278). However: “The very vividness and rawness of the memories” proved to her “that the experiences were traumatic”. The experience of being “torn away from home at a young age and sent to live . . . in an institution making the memories indelible” (Maxtone Graham, 2016, p. 283).

Nick Duffell and Thurstine Basset wrote about the experiences of hundreds of ex-boarders who attended workshops, assisting them to talk about their traumatic experiences (Duffell and Basset, 2016). They identify, as does Schaverien, the need for the child to dissociate from painful emotions they cannot process (Schaverien, 2015, pp. 117–118; Duffell and Basset, 2016, pp. 96–97). They found that in order to cope children adopt one of three “*strategic survival personalities*”: some comply or conform to the institutional norms, some rebel and some become “casualties” who are crushed by the experience (Duffell and Basset, 2016, p. 45). Alex Renton published research based on 800 accounts sent to him as a journalist, of which only 12 reported a positive experience. Over a quarter of the respondents reported physical and psychological abuse leaving them traumatised in adulthood (Renton, 2017, p. 382). The narratives of nine women from Iran sent away to board in the UK in the 1960s and 1970s gave them the opportunity to explore the impact on their development, bringing a cross-cultural perspective to the field. They too found that close friendships helped to compensate for the pain of being separated from their families (Latham and Ferdows, 2018). Edited autobiographical memoirs of women and men reveal the trauma the participants have carried across their lives (Trotter, 2019; Laughton *et al.*, 2021). Two accounts of the Australian context support findings from the UK research (Trimingham Jack, 2003; Jack, 2020). Journal articles also contribute to this substantial body of work (Barclay, 2011; Partridge, 2013; Trimingham Jack and Devereaux, 2019; Schaverien, 2021).

In summary, findings from research into boarding school trauma include:

the trauma of leaving parents, home and all that is familiar; the need to suppress the associated grief (“homesickness”) and the long-term consequences of dissociating from these emotions; the demands of finding a way of fitting in which leads to the development of a false “survival” personality; the long-term impact on adult life, the process of reconnecting and integrating traumatic memories into adult understandings; and the intergenerational pattern of young children being sent away to board, based on the entrenched belief that it is for their own good (Jack, 2020, p. 1).

Some children adapt, while others suffer trauma with long-term consequences (Schaverien, 2015, p. 113). The traumatic experiences of boarding school children are only just finding their way into the work of educational historians, however, the impressive body of work undertaken outside the field provides extensive experiential data for further research. The experiences of Charlotte Brontë and her sisters at the Clergy Daughters' School, outlined in the following section, both resonate with and contribute to findings from contemporary research.

### The Clergy Daughters' School

In 1820, Patrick Brontë took up the perpetual curacy in Haworth. His wife soon became seriously ill, enduring eight months of "agonizing" pain before dying in 1821 (Alexander and Smith, 2018, p. 63). While ill she withdrew from her children, aged between one and seven years of age, who turned to each other forming "a defensive 'square'" (Gérin, 1857, 1967, pp. 4–5). The close bond meant any idea of leaving each other to live elsewhere was almost unbearable (Gérin, 1857, 1967, p. 4). The eldest child, Maria, became a surrogate mother to her young siblings. Brontë was struck by her "powerfully intellectual mind" and she became "his trusted companion, the pride and delight of his widower's heart" (Brontë, 1855 cited in Fraser, 2003, pp. 30–31). The children's aunt and Brontë educated the children as a short-term measure, but the girls needed further education to earn a living as teachers or governesses.

The Clergy Daughters' School at Cowan Bridge was established in 1824 to educate the daughters of "the *really* necessitous clergy" for a "substantially reduced" fee (Harman, 2016, p. 44). It seemed an answer to Brontë's prayers (Fraser, 2003, p. 33). Keefe (1979, p. 6) described this decision as the "the most disastrous mistake" of his life. The prestige in evangelical circles of the trustees and the director of the school, Reverend William Carus Wilson, attracted Brontë. It offered a "plain and useful education" so students might "return with respectability and advantage to their own homes; or, to maintain themselves in the different situations of life to which Providence may call them" (Fraser, 2003, p. 34). Many were orphans, their fees being paid for by "patrons" (Gérin, 1857, 1967, p. 1) making it a "part" charity school. Brontë was not alone in his enthusiasm and other "ill-paid clergymen hailed the prospect with joy and eagerly" enrolled their children (Gaskell, 1857, 1997, p. 53).

Maria and Elizabeth Brontë (the second eldest child) arrived in July 1824. Their entrance was delayed because they were recovering from "a year of epidemics in Haworth during which . . . they had successively caught chickenpox, whooping-cough, and measles" (Gérin, 1857, 1967, p. 6). There was some doubt from the school authorities as to whether they should be admitted at all (Fraser, 2003, p. 35). Charlotte, aged eight, followed in August (Gérin, 1857, 1967, p. 1). Emily, the youngest of the siblings, aged six, arrived in late November (Fraser, 2003, p. 35). Charlotte was only there for eight months but it had a profound impact on her life.

Wilson, a Calvinist, believed in predestination – that the soul of a person had been chosen by God to either be saved or damned. However, the chosen ones were not saved unless they accept the grace of God so they could persevere in living a good life. Being an "orthodox Anglican" Brontë was not Calvinist, although he believed that hell was a "real place of punishment for impenitent sinners". Wilson's magazine, *The Children's Friend*, included frightening stories of what would happen to children who were disobedient and fall into "sin" (Harman, 2016, p. 46). It contained stories about children dying before they repented of their sins and being cast into "eternal damnation" (Alexander and Smith, 2018, p. 544). The fear "that a small child might be doomed to everlasting torment" lingered in Charlotte's consciousness (Alexander and Smith, 2018, p. 116).

Like other charity schools, the school regime was "a deliberately Spartan one of early rising, long prayers, sparse facilities, plain food and outdoor exercise". Students experienced "the cold, the scant, bad food, the rote learning, the strict discipline, the soul-stifling air of

Calvinism” (Harman, 2016, p. 46). They were subjected to “public beatings” and shaming punishments such as having to wear “untidy badges” (Alexander and Smith, 2018, p. 13). Wilson also had a “cruel streak”, having the “top knots” (curls) of students cut off because he believed his mission was “to mortify . . . the lusts of the flesh” (Fraser, 2003, p. 38), an event replicated in *Jane Eyre* (Brontë, 1847, 2006, p. 6). Charlotte remembered the cold, winter Sunday walks to church and sitting through two church services in “sodden shoes”, seeing this as “the origin” of many of the illnesses her sisters and other students suffered (Gérin, 1857, 1967, p. 10). When they returned after these long days, older students often pushed the little ones like Charlotte and Emily away from the fire, often taking their meagre food from them. Although an older girl might take pity on them and offer some protection (Gérin, 1857, 1967, pp. 8–9).

Nineteenth century parents were advised against “physical mollicoddling” of children (Thormählen, 2007, p. 44). The discourse was embraced by Wilson and “the whole bias of education was towards the suppression of physical claims, however fiercely they might make themselves felt in young and growing girls” (Gérin, 1857, 1967, p. 7). In 1857, pioneer of women’s education Dorothea Beale taught at the school and noted that the regime continued to be based on “Calvinistic harshness” and that students’ “hearts” were either “turned to stone or depressed into hopeless terror” (Beale, 1857, cited in Gordon, 2008, p. 31). The discourse of suppression of physical needs continued into the 20th century, with English parents coming under “moral pressure” to send their sons to boarding school away from the “softening influence” of “mothers and home” (Renton, 2017, p. 27).

Despite being educated at home by their aunt and father (who had a great love of learning), the teachers found Brontë girls’ knowledge to be inadequate (Harman, 2016, pp. 44–45). Charlotte was deemed to be: “Altogether clever of her age but knows nothing systematically—” (Register, the Clergy Daughters’ School, 1824, cited in Gérin, 1857, 1967, p. 1). She was “ignominiously placed at the bottom of the school”, probably because she was the youngest. Little did the teachers know that she had privately already written and illustrated her first book (Gérin, 1857, 1967, p. 5).

The Brontë sisters experienced a rich and open intellectual world at home leading Charlotte’s biographer, Winifred Gérin, to conclude that they “suffered more than the other children” to be subjected to a regime designed to “compress” their “minds into a set mould”. Even after the trauma of the death of their mother, home was a place of happiness in which they were given unusual freedom to invent their games and imaginary worlds (Gérin, 1857, 1967, p. 5). One might be led to agree with Gérin yet, in the 1970s, UK boarding schoolgirls reported that spontaneity was almost a “crime” and that “free time was not relaxing” as they sat “cooped up together” under supervision. The lack of “daily liberation” stands in contrast to the day-student who could leave a restricting regime for “psychological restoration, reverie and unstructured play” at home (Schaverien, 2015, pp. 40–41).

Early in 1825 typhus broke out, two girls died and 11 left of “ill health”. Ten-year-old Maria’s cough, which she had when she went to the school, grew worse and was ignored. Charlotte realised that both her older sisters were ill but was powerless to do anything about it, later stating: “I suffered to see my sisters perishing” (Harman, 2016, p. 54). A traumatic event that remained with Charlotte across her life happened to Maria after she was “blistered” on the side of her body to treat her illness which was later identified as tuberculosis (Gordon, 2008, p. 28). She was already weak and the next morning the resultant “open blister” made it difficult for her to get up (Gérin, 1857, 1967, p. 11). Some students advised her to remain in bed and she collapsed back on it until a teacher came up and found her there. Without any discussion, she strode across the room, “jerked Maria from her bed and whirled her to the middle of the floor, reviling her for dirty habits”. Maria had no option but to acquiesce to her demands and “with slow movements, began to draw her stockings over her wasted legs”.

When she joined the rest of the school students she was punished for being late (Gordon, 2008, p. 28). No one seemed to realise that she was close to death.

Brontë was shocked when he was eventually alerted to the seriousness of Maria's condition and took her home (Gaskell, 1857, 1997, p. 61). He was similar to some modern boarding school parents in having "little idea" of what takes place "in their absence" (Schaverien, 2015, p. 49). She died of tuberculosis two and half months later. Elizabeth quickly followed, dying of the same disease soon after she was brought home. The "scenes of cruelty", especially those inflicted on Maria, were "branded" on Charlotte's memory and never left it (Gordon, 2008, p. 28), haunting her throughout her life (Harman, 2016, p. 54). Contemporary research reveals that boarding school children who witness "ill treatment of others" are often left traumatised (Schaverien, 2015, p. 50). Charlotte joined the ranks of those who were "condemned to an endless nightmare, replaying these unbearable torments" until they were able to "process" and "assimilate" those traumatic memories into "coherent narratives" (Levine, 2015, p. 8). As Harman suggests, in *Jane Eyre* finally she could articulate the events and express her anger (Harman, 2016, p. 54).

Gaskell included the disparaging evidence Charlotte had shared about the school in the first print of her biography but was soon forced to "print a retraction" and to revise what she wrote under threat of a libel suit being brought by the family of the school's founder (Bock, 2018, pp. 42–43). However, what remains is more than sufficient evidence of a harsh religious regime, poor food, the confining and unhealthy nature of the school buildings, a "careless, dirty and wasteful cook", the children having to walk two miles to Church on Sundays in winter and remain there all day –made especially difficult by their "half-starved condition" (Gaskell, 1857, 1997, pp. 52–57). Later investigations found that "the food was hardly adequate for growing girls" (Fraser, 2003, p. 37). Gaskell concludes that for Charlotte and Emily "it caused a piece of suffering" that was "stamped into their very life" (Gaskell, 1857, 1997, p. 58). Researchers into trauma have found that if one is to reduce the effects of trauma, "to soften the power the intrusive power of the original, unmitigated horror", there a need to develop "alternative scenarios" (Van der Kolk and Van der Hart, 1991, p. 450). Writing can be helpful in this process (Beaudion, 2005, p. 33).

### Leaving home and entering an alien world

The novel begins with the abuse young Jane experiences in the home of her aunt where she is living after the death of her parents. Before she is sent away, Bessie, a kindly servant, shares with her what little she knows about boarding school life and Jane looks forward to it because it means leaving where she has been treated badly. Contemporary research reveals that boarding school children have little understanding what to expect and feel themselves to be "alone in a strange environment" (Schaverien, 2021, p. 608). Similarly, Jane describes it as like leaving for "remote and mysterious regions" (Brontë, 1847, 2006, p. 50).

Before Jane is put into the carriage to travel unaccompanied to the school, she clings to Bessie, covering her "neck with kisses" (Brontë, 1847, 2006, p. 50). There were and still are children in England who have a strong connection to servants "who, in the emotional absence of parents, provide stability and positive mirroring" (Schaverien, 2004, p. 694). Nannies often become key attachment figures for some children and the loss of them can be as significant as the loss of a parent (Hardin and Hardin, 2000, p. 1254). However, there is evidence that, whatever the background of the child when they are sent away to board, most feel the "loss of attachment figures and the distress of being 'looked after' by strangers" in a place where they must learn "to adapt to an inflexible system" (Schaverien, 2015, p. 7). Jane remembers her parting from Bessie but for many boarding school children that first separation is a memory void (Jack, 2020, p. 46). Some who are taken to the school by their parents are shocked when they realise they really are going to leave them on their own there (Trotter, 2019, p. 73).

It is not an uncommon experience for children to undertake the journey to boarding school alone and, even if with other students, the first time may have its own degree of trauma as they must cope with leaving their parents and fitting in with a group of strangers (Jack, 2020, pp. 46–51). When the carriage bearing Jane stops in a town for the passengers to dine, she is unable to eat, becoming “mortally apprehensive” of being kidnapped (Brontë, 1847, 2006, pp. 50–51), thereby creating one of those “frightening fantasies” that children form when they cannot understand and are anxious about their world (Segal, 2000, p. 29). The boarding school child does not really know what faces them and, while on the surface they may exhibit enthusiasm for it, as did Jane, anxiety and fear may exist below the surface. It may take years before the ex-boarder is able to access the negative feelings that lie behind this superficial excitement (Duffell, 2000, p. 136).

Eventually, the long journey to Lowood ends and the driver hands her over to a teacher. Turning away from the carriage, Jane sees before her a high wall with a door in it which is locked after they pass through it (Brontë, 1847, 2006, p. 51). She is immediately taken aback by the size of the school building. Charlotte also remembered being “struck” both at the time of her first arrival and later that the “spiked wall” surrounding the Clergy Daughters’ School was “preternaturally high” (Gérin, 1857, 1967, p. 4). The endurance of the memory and integration years later into her novel indicates what has now been identified as a “threshold memory”: a discrete moment in which boarding school students suddenly realise they have crossed over into a new world from which they will never fully return (Schaverien, 2015, p. 58; Duffell and Basset, 2016, p. 33). The locking of the door signals captivity. Many ex-boarders refer to boarding school as a form of “imprisonment” (Schaverien, 2015, p. 138), a “captivity” in which the person “is held against his or her will and subjected to the will of the other” (Herman, 1992/1997, pp. 74–75, cited in Schaverien, 2015, p. 50). At best, it is a “place of isolation from the world and some engage in fantasies of escape” (Schaverien, 2015, p. 143).

Jane is taken into the school by Miss Miller, a “careworn” teacher who has “a multiplicity of tasks on hand” (Brontë, 1847, 2006, p. 52). Boarding school children are often just one of many for busy teachers. In contrast, school superintendent Miss Temple touches her “cheek gently”, expressing concern that she had been sent there unaccompanied and recognises that she must be tired and hungry. This little act of kindness to a child who is exhausted and overwhelmed immediately endeared her to Jane and she idolises her as a “temple” of safety (Brontë, 1847, 2006, p. 56). For many boarding school children kindness is a rare experience and a 20th-century woman remembered that such acts “stand out from the grey, like peaks in a landscape” (Renton, 2017, p. 74).

Miss Miller leads Jane “from compartment to compartment, from passage to passage” until they come into a large room inhabited by what Jane thinks “appeared to be countless” students all dressed in the same uniform, although it was only 80 students (Brontë, 1847, 2006, p. 52). Her memory of the complexity of the school building and the number of students reveals how overwhelmed this new child is to such an institution. The next day Jane, like other boarding school students, begins the process of understanding the mysterious school regime, a process of “induction” which for most students is confusing, exhausting and stressful (Renton, 2017, p. 61). She engages in much “watching and thinking” as well as feeling isolated because she does not know any other students, although that is not “uncommon” for her given her previous life (Brontë, 1847, 2006, p. 58). Contemporary research into the early experiences of boarding school students reveals “intense feeling of obscurity” arising from being an unknown child amongst a large group of people as well as coping with the noise and the seemingly vast size of the school buildings (Renton, 2017, p. 62).

Like Charlotte, food takes precedence in Jane’s thinking in her first days at the school. It is a basic “physiological” need and “a person who is lacking food, safety, love and, esteem . . . hunger[s] for food more strongly than for anything else” (Maslow, 1943, p. 21). Hunger has been a common experience of boarding school children across the generations into the late

20th century (Schaverien, 2015, p. 25). Many ex-boarding school students of both sexes and different generations in the UK, Australia, Africa, India and New Zealand report experiencing hunger due to inadequate food (Schaverien, 2015, p. 171). Jane had hardly eaten the day she arrived at the school so by the next morning she was “nearly sick from inanition” only to discover breakfast consisted of “burnt porridge”. She manages to eat a mouthful or two then, like the other students, gives up. Jane overhears some of the teachers quietly sharing their disapproval of the breakfast with references to Mr Brocklehurst (Brontë, 1847, 2006, p. 55). However, they do nothing. It is Miss Temple who acts, ordering a special lunch of bread and cheese, despite knowing that there will be repercussions (Brontë, 1847, 2006, p. 57). Mr Brocklehurst admonishes her, drawing on the religious discourse of “man shall not live by bread alone”, cautioning her to think of the children’s “immortal souls” and the “spiritual edification” that could come from such privation, rather than satisfying the needs of their “vile bodies” (Brontë, 1847, 2006, pp. 74–75). Wilson held the same views. Such deprivation continued into the 20th century based on a belief that it prepared boys for “future privations” in life (Schaverien, 2015, p. 171).

The importance of “the sibling group”, referring to the close ties between students which replaced the loss of the family in boarding schools, has been established (Schaverien, 2015, p. 228). Maxtone Graham found that the loneliness of boarding school life taught women “an early lesson in the value of real friendship and loyalty”, for many of whom it lasted a lifetime (Maxtone Graham, 2016, p. 278). On Jane’s first evening she spends time alone with Helen Burns, who becomes her closest friend and ally. Jane discovers Helen is from Scotland and asks her if she wishes to return there (indirectly acknowledging that the school is causing her suffering). Helen replies that she is at Lowood to receive an education and must “endure patiently”. She adds that students must avoid being expelled because they would “bring great grief” to their relatives and it is her “duty” to tolerate the conditions and treatment (Brontë, 1847, 2006, p. 66). She has learned the lesson that boarding school children into the 21st century know – their parents want them to be there because they believe it is important for their future and for some it is a family tradition. The children are left “to survive in what is essentially an alien environment” which is “beset with rules, which are easily infringed, but are said to be for the good of the children”. They are cared for by adults who are not their parents, must live away from all that is familiar, including their toys and pets, and be “constantly surrounded by their peers . . . scared and missing their families, but not allowed to show their feelings” (Duffell and Basset, 2016, p. 45–46). Jane, like Charlotte, attended a school that was a part charity school and the way in which such schools were run also contributed to the trauma.

### Charity schools

Jane attended a “charity” school; these were particularly popular in 18th-century England (Schmidt, 2010, p. 777). Charlotte’s school was a “part-charity” school with fees supplemented by parents or benefactors. These schools began in the 16th century informed by the Christian belief in the giving of alms from the surplus of the rich to those less fortunate, as part of “natural law” as well as in “imitation of Christ” (Schmidt, 2010, p. 786). It has been argued that they contributed to “attempt[s] . . . to imagine, organise, and regulate” the way in which people existed in society that had outcomes “far beyond almsgiving” (Schmidt, 2010, p. 774). Their “triple mandate . . . was the inculcation of religious doctrine, moral habits, and work discipline among the children” (Schmidt, 2010, p. 776). They were also part of a “new series of social and governmental relationships through the operation of which the role of the poor as parents was opened to an intensified scrutiny, suspicion, and stigma” (Schmidt, 2010, p. 777). The education was “contentious” with “worries that the poor might think themselves above their station”, hence becoming insubordinate (Schmidt, 2010, p. 783), or that the parents might obstruct “the work of benevolence” (Schmidt, 2010, p. 796). These anxieties probably

contributed to religious sermons in those schools containing “powerful images of the poor as essentially barbarous, unable to reproduce norms of order and discipline”. The schools also adopted “policies and strategies designed to curtail and to exclude parental influence” (Schmidt, 2010, p. 777).

The subjects taught varied according to “the school, its providers and governance”. The curriculum of many was basic, with a focus on moral training, and some reading and singing. However, there were others that offered a wider curriculum, such as the Clergy Daughters’ School, in preparation for employment (Gregorová, 2019, p. 39). They put into “circulation a new marker by which to designate and perceive poverty” including parents’ “capacity . . . to educate their children to a certain standard”. This standard was expanded to include the children of families that were not “paupers” (Schmidt, 2010, p. 780). The Brontë girls needed a recognised school education to meet the required standards for teaching. When their father sent them to a charity school he entered them into “a relation of charity between ‘the rich’ and ‘the poor’ thereby (inadvertently) assigning them to the category of ‘poor’” (Schmidt, 2010, p. 780). The fact that this school was specifically for the daughters of clergy and included some fees must have, in his mind, removed it from this category. Although a child, Charlotte was astute enough to ascertain even after a short time there her placement in society. It was the beginning of an unhappy way of seeing herself – as an “object of charity” (Fraser, 2003, p. 68). In 1800, prominent social reformer, Mrs Catherine Cappe, “daughter of one clergyman and the widow of another”, published a book outlining some of the cruel and abusive practices employed at these schools (Kamm, 1965, p. 63) and, by the beginning of the 19th century, the number of charity schools had declined (Kamm, 1965, p. 69). Yet the system lingered (Kamm, 1965, pp. 59–60).

The portrayal of Helen Burns exemplifies how a clever charity schoolchild is firmly kept in her social class. She is older than Jane and they form a bond with Helen taking a motherly position. The character is based on Charlotte’s sister, Maria Brontë (Alexander and Smith, 2018, p. 111). Close bonds are common in girls’ boarding schools and may include a “maternal element”, with younger children seeking love and care (Schaverien, 2015, p. 42). On Jane’s first day at the school, she sits near a group of students receiving a lesson in English history. At the beginning of the class, Helen is placed at the top but soon sent to the bottom position for a minor error. There the teacher continues to deride her, particularly for her posture. An examination at the end of the lesson reveals that all had retained little of it except for Helen who demonstrates that she had absorbed and understood it all. Jane expects her to be commended but is shocked when instead she was treated with great vitriol by the teacher for having dirty nails. Helen is then made to fetch a switch made of twigs and hand it to the teacher who flogs her with it a dozen times on the neck for her “slatternly habits” (Brontë, 1847, 2006, pp. 63–64). One way of interpreting this action is that it was an overt intention to keep Helen in her place; however, another reading is that Helen’s (and Maria Brontë’s) easy intelligence is confronting to a teacher who is probably struggling to deal with her own situation – teaching children in the lowest levels of society – and perhaps she too had been educated in a similar institution. If so, then replicating such practices leads to intergenerational trauma.

### **Abuse, trauma and dissociation**

“Ferocious” beatings were widespread in boys’ schools in the 1820s and 1830s, where “masters would openly thrash until screams of pain had been elicited”, with students witnessing the “cruelty and violence” (Gathorne-Hardy, 1972, p. 103). Beatings were less common in girls’ boarding schools in the 19th century (Schaverien, 2015, p. 37). Shaming was a control mechanism that was used in girls’ schools in that period and continues to be practiced even into contemporary times. It also trains girls to “to keep themselves hidden” (Schaverien, 2015, p. 43). The intention is to bring about “conformity” not only to school regimes but to gender roles (Schaverien, 2015, p. 143).

Shame begins with “withering disapproval” from the teachers and moves to “public humiliation” (Schaverien, 2015, p. 39). Punishments that include “humiliation” continued to be used in boarding schools well into the 21st century (Schaverien, 2015, p. 204) and “can lead to self-blame and self-abuse” (Schaverien, 2015, p. 149). Some abused children believe that their “innate badness is the cause” of what has happened to them. Their hope is that, if they try hard enough, they may “earn forgiveness” (Herman, 1992, p. 103).

Helen is submitted to shaming when she is “dismissed in disgrace” by a teacher. Her “ignominious” punishment is being made to stand alone in the middle of the large classroom, a punishment Jane surmises would have filled her with shame. Yet Helen remains “composed” and seemingly not distressed. When Jane studies her more closely, she notices that Helen looks as though she gone somewhere else in her mind, eyes downward but not seeing, “her sight turned inward”, remembering another place and time. She is not present in the moment (Brontë, 1847, 2006, pp. 61–62). Later, Helen confides to Jane that often, when she is being taught by that teacher, she “lose[s] the sound” of the teacher’s voice and “fall[s] into a sort of dream”, taking herself away to her home in Scotland, especially to the sound of the “little brook” that runs beside it (Brontë, 1847, 2006, pp. 67–68). Trauma theorists would quickly identify her behaviour as “dissociation”, considered to be “the essence of trauma” (Van der Kolk, 2014, pp. 65–66). This is the way in which a person who is suffering a traumatic event creates “distance from what is happening in order to avoid being overwhelmed and survive psychologically intact”. It involves “disowning their most vulnerable and most wounded selves” (Fisher, 2017, p. 19).

Dissociation is made possible because the brain is divided into left and right hemispheres, although children tend to rely on the right side (Fisher, 2017, p. 23). The separation allows a person to split off traumatic events, putting them in the left hemisphere. While “knowledge” about what happened in such events may be “available to both hemispheres”, it is only the left hemisphere that uses language to describe the associated emotions (Fisher, 2017, p. 23). If a child were to experience the emotions associated with trauma, it would be overwhelming as they do not have the language to process it (Fisher, 2017, p. 25). The child responds by “encapsulation of the self”, forming a “protective shell” (Schaverien, 2015, p. 141). This response has been reported by ex-boarders (Schaverien, 2015, p. 122). On another occasion, when the teacher discovers that Helen’s bedroom drawers are disorganised, she is made to wear a “Slatern” sign around her forehead for the day. She endures her punishment in her usual uncomplaining manner, but Jane is filled with fury and, when the teacher goes to bed, tears it from her friend, casting it into the fire (Brontë, 1847, 2006, pp. 87–88).

Jane too suffers shaming when she accidentally breaks her slate during one of Mr Brocklehurst’s visits to the school. He makes her stand on a stool in front of him as he utters a litany of her faults. When he finishes his long diatribe, he insists she remain on the stool for a half hour commanding that no one speak to her in that time. Jane feels shame at being “exposed to general view on a pedestal of infamy” and fear almost overcomes her. Helen saves her by finding an excuse to walk past and somehow imbue this “victim” with courage that flowed out from her as if she were a “martyr”, “hero” or “angel” (Brontë, 1847, 2006, pp. 77–80). It has been observed that: “Trauma and happiness” exist “side by side” in boarding schools because “intense friendships, deep love and trust between children” are “born in adversity” (Renton, 2017, p. 106). “Separated from their families, children become dependent on each other” (Renton, 2017, p. 125).

Research reveals that boarding school students adopt a “strategic survival personality” in order to survive what they experience to be “a dangerous place” (Duffell and Basset, 2016, p. 46). Some become “Compliers or Conformers” taking on “the values of the school”, others become “Rebels” adopting an “anti-authority stance”, while some are “Casualties or the Crushed”. Those in this last group are often subjected to “bullying and scapegoating” by teachers and students (Duffell and Basset, 2016, pp. 53–56). When Jane is made to stand on the

stool, Helen rebels and disobeys Brocklehurst's order by returning to Jane. Later Helen tells Jane that he is not a "God" and not esteemed by many people (Brontë, 1847, 2006, p. 82). She thereby challenges the man's authority (Reger, 1992, pp. 213–214). However, she is not able to maintain this position.

When Janes tells Helen about the pain of her early life, Helen gently admonishes her for being "weak and silly to say" that she "cannot bear" all the difficult events that have befallen her because in Helen's mind such suffering is one's "fate" and must be borne (Brontë, 1847, 2006, p. 66). Charlotte loathed the "soul-stifling dogmas" preached by Wilson (Harman, 2016, p. 54), challenging them when Jane declares: "If people are always kind and obedient to those who are cruel and unjust, the wicked people would have it all their own way" by continuing such behaviour (Brontë, 1847, 2006, p. 68). Some boarding school children support each other in their grief by trying to "console each other" (Schaverien, 2015, p. 121) but without an adult to scaffold them they are not able to develop a coherent and meaningful narrative that acknowledges their feelings (Schaverien, 2015, p. 117). Religious teachings, especially in convent schools, offered some students like Helen a way of understanding and enduring their suffering (Trimingham Jack, 2003, p. 97).

Helen may have rebelled when she saw Jane being abused but she was unable to apply it to herself. She tells Jane that a teacher was right in assessing her (Helen) as forgetful, untidy and inattentive in class, describing herself derogatively as having a "wretchedly defective nature" (Brontë, 1847, 2006, p. 67). She has so internalised being denigrated that on her death bed she says that it is better she dies because she does not have the "qualities or talents" to do well in the world and her faults were too entrenched (Brontë, 1847, 2006, p. 97). She has been crushed by the experiences and exemplifies the "self-blame" employed by abused children (Schaverien, 2015, p. 149).

Alice Miller, who has written extensively about childhood trauma, warns that trying to see the situation from the abuser's perspective, as Helen does by accepting the teacher's view of her, leads the survivor into compassion for the abuser at the cost of compassion for themselves. Miller advises that: "The path to adulthood lies not in tolerance for the cruelties we have been exposed to but in the realization of our own truth and the development of empathy for the maltreated child (Miller, 2006, p. 155). Judith Herman similarly argues that for those who suffered in childhood there is a need to realise that what "was stolen from them was irreplaceable" (Herman, 1992, 2001, p. 193). Charlotte exhibited more compassion for those responsible for what happened at Cowan Bridge than for herself. When she realised that the publication of *Jane Eyre* had caused distress to the family of Reverend Carus Wilson (by then deceased), the key driver of establishing the Clergy Daughters' School, her immediate sympathy was with his family rather than with her own child self who had suffered such a deep wounding. Still, she reiterated that what she wrote was true. Her positioning seemed to oscillate between sympathy informed by the religious discourse of forgiveness towards those involved in the Clergy Daughters' School and the anger she felt as a child about the abuse inflicted on Maria, the deaths of both girls and what she witnessed being done to other students there.

Deaths were common in boys' boarding schools in the 18th and 19th centuries, and even in the "1950s, 1960s and 1970s" children died "directly" or "indirectly" as a result of bullying, through being forced to "engage in dangerous behaviours", by suicide and from "contagious illnesses" (Schaverien, 2015, p. 22). The school regime of Lowood could be referred to as "poisonous pedagogy": "the deliberate application of the breaking of a child's will in order to socialise it" (Miller, 1983, p. 8, cited in Duffell and Basset, 2016, p. 154). Some children, like Helen, are crushed by such pedagogies, while others rebel by exhibiting "a refusal to be totally socialised", thereby showing an "unwillingness to surrender to a bad regime" (Duffell and Basset, 2016, p. 155). Jane wants to learn and pays close attention to the lessons, and she knows how to be careful to avoid trouble (Brontë, 1847, 2006, p. 67). Like all abused children she is "in a state of constant alertness", knowing that danger was always near (Herman, 1992,

2001, p. 99) and sometimes the banks of control break and they become “rageful and sometimes aggressive” (Herman, 1992, 2001, p. 104), for example, when Jane tears the “Slattern” placard from Helen.

Charlotte described herself while at Cowan Bridge as “plodding and industrious” (Brontë, no date, cited in Fraser, 2003, p. 42). In so doing, she seems to have adopted a “conforming” personality, doing what was required while trying not to stand out, thereby avoiding trouble. Her strategy seems to have been successful because later, after the publication of her novel, the teachers could remember little about her (Harman, 2016, p. 50). Some boarding school children adopt a response that is similar to that used by prisoners when they realise “the hopelessness of fighting the system . . . they give up and apparently comply”. The child appears to “adapt . . . whilst keeping a part of the self-hidden and so protected”. However, internally they may at times have “impotent rage” but no way of expressing it (Schaverien, 2015, p. 149). Charlotte’s rage burst forth in *Jane Eyre*. While she survived as do many children by employing outward conformity, the cost was that it led to “an encapsulation of the self” behind “a protective shell” (Schaverien, 2015, p. 141). It may take years for a person to remove this shell, to become familiar with themselves, including their own capacities.

### Conclusion

When *Jane Eyre* was published, one defence given by those who sought to protect the reputation of Wilson was that Charlotte was “a mere child at the time, incapable of evaluating the true significance of events, seeing them through the magnifying glass of childhood” and that her view was “clouded by emotion” (Fraser, 2003, p. 41). The charge constructs the child as an unreliable witness, denying her the possibility of giving testimony. It is also an example of the way in which “auto-biographical self-representation” acts as a “disruptive performance . . . freighted with risk” as it challenges “dominant notions of legitimacy” (Gilmore, 2017, p. 80). In this case, the book challenged boarding school and religious charity practices, including using schools to keep children within their social position. By drawing on contemporary research into the traumatic impact on many children who are sent to boarding school, the testimony contained in the novel bears witness that what happened to Charlotte and her sisters was not clouded by childhood emotion. Rather, it was reflective of the historical phenomenon of boarding school trauma which recent literature has established to have encompassed cultural practices which continue into the present and that are transnational (Jack, 2020, p. 3).

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